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Pollard Strikes Again

WASHINGTON

Senator David Durenberger of Minnesota, until recently the Republican chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, called to set up a breakfast date last week.

Fine with me; I had heard he was a nice guy, maybe a little flaky, and assumed he wanted to explain his recent gaffe: he had told a group of Jewish leaders in Palm Beach that "we changed the rules in the early 80's," according to someone present who took notes, "We recruited an Israeli to spy on Israel and he got caught... I can't justify Pollard, but I can understand it."

Despite the disclaimer, that was intended to reassure Jews that "everybody did it," and that Israel was justified in retaliating by hiring an American to betray his country. By offering comfort to the higher-ups in Israel who are trying to conceal their wrongdoing, Senator Durenberger strains the ties between Israelis and Americans.

My mind was fixed on this issue just as my mouth was fixed for an elegant breakfast at Washington's Grand Hotel. But at the last minute, Mr. Durenberger's office called to cancel; no flaky croissants and no flaky Senator. Nor was he available to talk on the telephone. An aide made clear that I was the last person in Washington he wanted to talk to about the Pollard affair.

Why the sudden clam-up? A few calls by reporter Martin Tolchin of The Times unearthed the story: acting on complaints from other senators and Administration officials, the Senate Ethics Committee had begun an investigation of Senator Durenberger's apparent breach of security.

"This is censure stuff," one angry senator told me. Only six senators in our history have been censured by the Senate, the last being Joseph McCarthy in 1954.

This case is unlikely to go that far, but what infuriates some senators and disturbs many others is that the Durenberger leak justifies the Presidential "findings" that secretly deny oversight to the Senate. This is catnip to the tell-'em-nothin' crowd in the White House. Until now, Senate Intelligence has been relatively leakproof; here is a former chairman tossing off a state secret at a fund-raiser.

Wait: what if the Durenberger story is a figment of his imagination, a way of getting even with his old tormentor, William Casey? Both defense ministers of the U.S. and Israel have flatly denied that the C.I.A. was caught trying to penetrate the Israeli Government, and there is always the chance those denials are true; if so, how can the Senator's spreading of a false story for reassurance and/or vengeance purposes be a breach of security? If it ain't true, no secret leaked.

Therein lies the Senate's bind. If Mr. Durenberger's charge of a C.I.A. rule change about spying on allies is true, a vote to discipline him would confirm it and spill the secret; if it is not true, an ethics committee decision not to bring charges would allow intelligence committee members unfairly to clobber the executive branch with impunity.

Unbind yourselves, senators; the only way out is full disclosure, letting the chips fall on the C.I.A. or on Senator Durenberger's re-election chances in 1988.

This investigation requires an intelligence committee study, with Administration cooperation, of our policy on spying on allies: Is there no line between the vacuum-cleaner collection of information from our Big Ear and the payment of covert agents in friendly capitals? The Golden Rule of Spookery — do it to your allies before your allies do it to you — is not necessarily the best national policy.

Thus has the Pollard case struck again, this time endangering the career of a U.S. Senator who was only trying to "understand" the Israeli motivation. The point should not be lost on Jerusalem: this wound is festering, not healing.

Col. Aviem Sella, the Pollard Israeli handler, yesterday gave up the prestigious assignment he was awarded just before the spies were sentenced. In a couple of weeks, the non-judicial Israeli commission that has promised total secrecy to witnesses will probably recommend the retirement from state-owned industry of the spymaster Rafi Eitan, with some stern finger-wagging at the collective leadership. That would be too little and too late, an attempt to appease Americans rather than cure the illness that infects the cover-up coalition.

Message to Israel from a friend who eats breakfast alone: forget about coming clean as a favor to American Jews or to insure continued U.S. aid. Your central purpose in making wrongdoers accountable is to preserve the soul of your democracy.

Where are the leaders with the courage and patriotism to say, "I knew about the operation, I tacitly authorized it, I meant well, I was mistaken, I resign"? Failing that, where is the new Isaiah now that Israel needs him? □